

Asoka

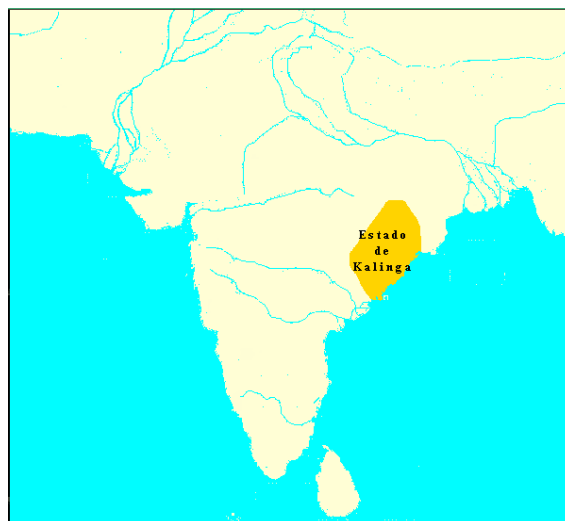
Asoka will be remembered for making India a prosperous and wealthy nation, however, it was a religious contribution where he made his greatest contribution. When rule of India was up for grabs, Asoka fought his brothers for control of the Mauryan Empire. Asoka, known as “the sorrowless one” emerged victorious and took control of India.

From the very beginning, Asoka was all about conquest and riches. His armies conquered many neighboring kingdoms so the wealth of India grew great. In about 260 BC, he launched a full-scale invasion of Kalinga, a nearby civilization. Ancient sources describe an enormous bloodbath in which 100,000 were killed. Another 150,000 Kalingans were captured or driven from their homes, thousands more died of illness or starvation in the months that followed.

Having attained his most cherished goal of becoming the most powerful man in India’s history, Asoka had a change of heart. As he toured the fields of Kalinga, he held the mangled bodies of the dead, witnessed terrible carnage, and saw the suffering of separated families. He became remorseful and wrote a message to his followers that was inscribed on rocks:

“I am deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered. But I am pained even more when that country’s people are injured, killed or separated from their loved ones. Even those who are not affected by all this suffer when they see friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives affected. These misfortunes befall all as a result of war, and this pains me. Therefore the killing, death or deportation of a hundredth, or even a thousandth part of those who died during the conquest of Kalinga not pains me. Truly I believe that non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings is a moral policy.”

Asoka forbade the slaughter and sacrifice of animals, converted to Buddhism and sent missionaries to spread the religion. He also focused on the welfare of his subjects by creating hospitals, roads, fountains and gardens.



Gandhi:

Mohandas Gandhi was a major political and spiritual leader of India who was the strength behind its movement for independence from Britain and its outlawing of the caste system. He was a pioneer of civil disobedience, which used the power of numbers to gain national attention for specific causes.

Gandhi first used his idea of civil disobedience in the Indian struggle for civil rights in South Africa. Upon his return to India, he helped lead poor farmers and workers to protest oppressive taxation and discrimination. Finally, he helped give women rights and liberated untouchables from the confines of the caste system.

Gandhi remained committed to non-violence even in the most extreme situations. He was a student of Hindu philosophy and lived simply, organizing an ashram that was self-sufficient in its needs. He made his own clothes and lived on a simple vegetarian diet. He used rigorous fasts and self-purification as a means of protest.

Gandhi's teachings have inspired civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr in the US and Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

